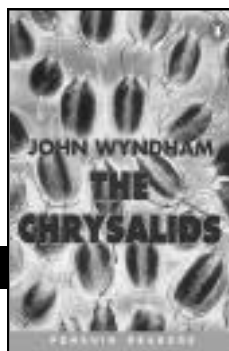


Teacher's notes

The Chrysalids

by John Wyndham



SUMMARY

The *Chrysalids* is a science fiction story by John Wyndham, a popular twentieth-century British writer. It takes place in the future, many years after a nuclear war has devastated large areas of the world. The society of Waknuk in Labrador has survived, but it is a primitive agricultural theocracy reminiscent of Salem, Massachusetts at the time of the Salem witch hunts. However, in Waknuk it isn't witches but mutants that the people fear. Radiation from the war still causes frequent mutations in plants, animals and humans and the people adhere to a strict religious code which does not tolerate deviation of any kind. Their religion demands that anything born with any type of imperfection be destroyed. Imperfect crops are burnt and animals slaughtered. Human 'Deviations' are either killed or exiled to a lawless area called the Fringes which lies to the south. Beyond there lie the Badlands where the whole of nature is distorted, and further south still are the Blacklands where everything is burnt and nothing will grow. Few people have any curiosity about what lies beyond, though there are rumours of other countries inhabited by strange people.

The story is told from the point of view of David, the son of one of the most powerful men in Waknuk, and one of the most vehement in upholding the strict and cruel religious code. As a child, David makes friends with Sophie, a girl who has six toes on each foot. Her parents have hidden her from the authorities and they beg David not to tell. When their secret is accidentally discovered, David sees at first hand the relentless cruelty of the society in which he lives. However, he has his own secret. David is one of a group of children who can communicate with each other telepathically. He is, therefore, himself a 'Deviation'. He also has strange dreams of a city with skyscrapers, horseless vehicles and flying machines. David and the others struggle to keep their telepathy a secret, but eventually they come under suspicion when it becomes clear that David's younger sister, Petra, has even greater powers. Being a young child, she has little ability to control her thoughts and no real awareness of the dangers they present. Eventually the authorities come to arrest the group and they have to flee into the Fringes, pursued by David's father and the other men. Petra then starts receiving telepathic communications from someone a very long way away. The others cannot hear the messages, but Petra says that they are coming from a woman in a place called Sealand far to the south. It transpires that this is the advanced industrialised society of David's dreams, where everyone is telepathic. The woman rescues them by helicopter in the middle of a battle between the people of the Fringes and the men from Waknuk.

ABOUT JOHN WYNDHAM

John Wyndham is the most well-known of the many pseudonyms of the British writer John Wyndham Parkes Lucas Beynon Harris. He was born in Knowle, England in 1903 and spent his early childhood in Birmingham. His parents separated while he was a child and he attended a series of boarding schools, finally at Bedales, a forward thinking co-educational school in Hampshire, where his creativity was encouraged. After he left school he tried several careers including law, farming, commercial art and advertising and throughout the 1930s he wrote several short stories for magazines. During the Second World War, he worked in the civil service and then served in the army.

In the 1950s John Wyndham took advantage of the growing popularity of science fiction stories to write a series of novels, including *The Day of the Triffids* (1951) and *The Midwich Cuckoos* (1957) which

were made into films, *The Kraken Wakes* (1953), *The Chrysalids* (1955) and *Trouble with Lichen* (1960). His stories are classed as science fiction, although they contain relatively little 'science', no amazing technological inventions of the future, and none of them are set in space. Instead the stories take place on Earth, often an Earth which has gone wrong in some way, and they deal with ordinary people coming to terms with extraordinary circumstances. Most are written in the first person and this gives them an immediacy that has had lasting appeal. John Wyndham died in 1969.

BACKGROUND AND THEMES

After the Second World War, stories and films involving threats to the survival of the world from outside forces became very popular. This may be attributed to the collective trauma experienced by those who had endured the horrors of the war. Reading about and seeing on screen the triumph of ordinary people against mythical monsters had a cathartic effect on people for whom the monsters had been all too human. The war had also brought the world into the nuclear age and there were understandable fears about the effects of the new technology and about where possession of nuclear weapons would lead society. The advent of the Cold War between the West and the Soviet Union exacerbated these fears.

The Chrysalids takes as its starting point a world which has already been devastated by nuclear war. Although the people of Waknuk have few memories of the time of the Old People, they know that the division of the world into areas such as the Blacklands, the Badlands and the Fringes has come about through a terrible war. The place names give us some idea of what has happened. Waknuk is in Labrador in Canada, which places the Blacklands, the worst affected area and, no doubt, the epicentre of the final nuclear explosion, in the United States. David's Uncle Axel reports that sailors who go too close to land there become sick and die, which suggests a strong concentration of residual radiation. Sealand would seem to be New Zealand, far enough away from the United States and the Soviet Union (perceived to be the likely opponents in a nuclear war) to have survived relatively intact. The concentric nature of the devastation brought about by a nuclear explosion, with the effects of radiation decreasing the further you are from the epicentre, fits with what we know from the real nuclear bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in Japan in World War II. In the book, the effects of radiation are still felt in Waknuk, generations after the end of the war, with occasional mutations in crops, animals and humans. This is also something scientists have noted from the world's first experience of nuclear weapons and more recently from the explosion of the nuclear power station at Chernobyl.

The society of Waknuk is dominated by a religion which is obsessed by perfection. Every Sunday, in church, the people recite a creed which declares exactly how many limbs a person must have. Anything which is different from this description is termed a Deviation and the people are told that God hates Deviations and demands their destruction. Before a baby is accepted, it must be examined by an inspector and given a certificate of perfection. A child that fails the test is killed and a woman who gives birth to three Deviations can be divorced by her husband and cast out.

In describing this rigid and heartless society, Wyndham is attacking the kind of religious or social intolerance that excludes anyone who is in any way different. Uncle Axel tells David of countries beyond

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the Blacklands where the people look very different. Interestingly, they too believe that they look 'right', though it is unclear whether they are also intolerant of outsiders. Bigotry, hypocrisy and ignorance are the prevailing characteristics of Waknuk and the story chronicles the escape of David and the others to a world of greater enlightenment.

Wyndham is also highlighting the foolishness of judging by outward appearances. Sophie's six toes are a small and insignificant feature of her appearance. The telepathic powers of David and the other children pose far more of a threat to the authorities, yet they escape persecution for years because their 'deviation' is not visible.

If Wyndham's bleak vision is a metaphor for twentieth century society, then no one escapes lightly. The bigotry and intolerance of Waknuk are as reminiscent of communism with its imposition of conformity and extermination of dissenters as they are of fundamentalist religions which insist that they possess the one and only truth. The destruction of all that is perceived to be imperfect also has echoes of Hitler's desire for a perfect Aryan race and his extermination of Jews, homosexuals and the disabled.

The title, *The Chrysalids*, is somewhat ambiguous. The word *chrysalid* is derived from chrysalis, the stage which the larvae of moths and butterflies pass through before they become adults. It is a stage in which the insect appears dormant and unmoving, but changes are taking place inside which enable it to emerge from the chrysalis as a more advanced form of life. In the novel the word chrysalids may refer to David and the other telepathic children. They could be seen as the intermediate stage between the people of Waknuk whose fear of the past has led to a stagnant, retrograde society and the people of the free world, Sealand, who have progressed. In their escape to Sealand, the children are like insects leaving behind their crawling caterpillar existence to emerge from their chrysalis as free-flying butterflies.

On the other hand, the whole society of Waknuk could be seen as a chrysalis, a dormant and stagnant intermediate stage between the earlier humans who caused the nuclear destruction and the new enlightened and telepathic humans who live in Sealand.

Communicative activities

The following teacher-led activities cover the same sections of text as the exercises at the back of the Reader, and supplement those exercises. For supplementary exercises covering shorter sections of the book, see the photocopyable Student's Activities pages of this Factsheet. These are primarily for use with class readers, but with the exception of pair/groupwork questions, can also be used by students working alone in a self-access centre.

ACTIVITIES BEFORE READING THE BOOK

Tell students that this book is about a society where people are not allowed to be different. They must be perfect. People who have something wrong with their bodies have to live in a horrible place where there isn't enough food and babies which are born different are killed.

- 1 Put students into small groups and ask them to imagine that they live in this society. How would they feel? What would they do if they, or a member of their family, had a baby with six toes? What would they do if they suspected there was something wrong with one of their neighbours? Groups then report back to the class.
- 2 In small groups, students discuss how our society treats people who are different.

ACTIVITIES AFTER READING A SECTION

Part One

CHAPTERS 1-4

- 1 In bed after his father beat him, David told Rosalind and the others about Sophie and what happened to her. Ask

students to work in pairs and to role-play the conversation between David and Rosalind.

- 2 Put students in small groups and tell them to imagine that Aunt Harriet left a letter for her sister before she killed herself. In this letter she explained why she was going to kill herself and her baby, how she felt about the people of Waknuk and how she felt when her sister wouldn't help her. Ask them to write the letter.

CHAPTERS 5-8

- 1 Ask students to discuss who is the worst character in the story: David's father, his mother, the inspector or Alan. Why do they think this?
- 2 Ask students to discuss whether Uncle Axel was right to kill Alan.

CHAPTERS 9-11

In small groups, students tell the story of the escape into the Fringes and the rescue by the woman from Sealand from the point of view of one of the following characters. As they tell the story to the class, each member of the group takes a turn to say a sentence.

(a) Rosalind, (b) Michael, (c) Sophie

ACTIVITIES AFTER READING THE BOOK

Michael's last words to the others as they leave are 'We'll meet again.' In small groups, students write the story of how Michael and Rachel escape from Waknuk and join the others in Sealand.

Glossary

It will be useful for your students to know the following new words. They are practised in the 'Before You Read' sections at the back of the book. (Definitions are based on those in the Longman Active Study Dictionary.)

Chapters 1-4

- alien** (n) a creature that comes from another world
- arrow** (n) a thin straight weapon with a point at one end that you shoot from a bow
- certificate** (n) a document that officially states that something is true
- chrysalid** (n) derived from chrysalis, a moth or butterfly at the stage of development before becoming an adult when it has a hard outer covering
- creature** (n) an animal, fish or insect
- deviation** (n) a difference from what is normal or acceptable
- fringe** (n) the outside edge of something
- God** (n) the being who Christians, Jews and Muslims pray to
- inspector** (n) someone who checks that something is of a good enough standard
- shock** (n) an unpleasant surprise
- slide** (v) to move smoothly across a surface
- spider** (n) a small creature with eight legs that make a web to catch insects

Chapters 5-8

- basket** (n) a container made from thin pieces of wood woven together
- bow** (n) a curved wooden weapon with a tight string, used for shooting arrows
- power** (n) a special ability to do something
- tracks** (n) marks on the ground made by an animal, person or vehicle

Chapters 9-11

- cave** (n) a large hole in the side of a cliff
- spray** (v) to make liquid come out of a container in a stream of very small drops
- stick** (v) to join something to something else using a substance such as glue
- thread** (n) a long thin string



Student's activities

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Students can do these exercises alone or with one or more other students. Pair/group-only activities are marked.

Activities before reading the book

- Read the first twelve lines of the Introduction and then close your book. Are the following sentences right or wrong?
 - There was a terrible war before the story starts.
 - The whole world is dead and black and nothing grows there.
 - The people of Waknuk don't have a religion.
 - Everyone in Waknuk knows about David's difference.
 - There is something different about Sophie's feet.
- Read the second part of the Introduction, about John Wyndham, and then close your book. Complete these sentences.
 - John Wyndham in 1903.
 - He began to write short in 1930.
 - A triffid is a large meat-eating
 - In many of John Wyndham's books, ordinary people live in an world.

Activities while reading the book

CHAPTERS 1-4

Chapter 1

- Close your book. Choose the right ending for these sentences.
 - Sophie was different from other children because ...
 - she had strange dreams about a city by the sea.
 - her dress didn't have a cross on the front.
 - she had six toes on each foot.
 - In David's dream ...
 - his father killed Sophie because she was a Deviation.
 - his father killed a pig because it was a Deviation.
 - his father killed Sophie and a pig because they were Deviations.
- Why do the people of Waknuk kill Deviations?
- Look at these names.
Sophie Mary Rosalind
Who is David's (a) sister? (b) friend? (c) cousin?

Chapter 2

- How did Uncle Axel find out that David and Rosalind could talk by thought-shapes? How is Uncle Axel different from David's father?

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- Are these sentences right or wrong? Correct the wrong ones.
 - The people of the Fringes look like the people from Waknuk.
 - The man with long thin arms and legs looked like David's father.
 - David thought Sophie's feet were terrible.
 - Alan looked at Sophie's footprint and saw that she had six toes.

Chapter 3

- Put the correct word into these sentences. Then put the sentences in the right order.
stayed others left inspector stick footprint questions killed
 - The inspector said that only animal Deviations are, not people.
 - David's father hit him with a
 - The inspector asked David lots of about Sophie.
 - Sophie and her parents their house that evening.
 - David told Rosalind and the about Sophie.
 - The next morning the was at David's house.
 - David at Sophie's house all night.
 - David told Sophie's father that Alan saw her
- Draw a map to show the position of Waknuk, the Blacklands, the Badlands and the Fringes.

Chapter 4

- Answer these questions.
 - Why didn't anyone talk about the new baby before the inspector came?
 - What could David's father do if his wife had three babies which were Deviations?
 - What did Aunt Harriet want David's mother to do?
 - What happened to Aunt Harriet?
- Which of the words below describe the people in the story?
different cold lovely angry sad
David's father:
Aunt Harriet:
Petra:
David's mother:
Aunt Harriet's baby:

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Student's activities

CHAPTERS 5-8

Chapter 5

- Join these beginnings and ends of sentences.
 - David asked God to make him
 - David and his friends found out new things
 - There were eight children
 - They found out about Petra's special power
 - They couldn't explain the danger to Petra
 - The men from the fields were unsure of David's story
 - who could talk in thought-shapes.
 - because they didn't hear Petra shouting.
 - because she sent out strong messages when she fell in the river.
 - because she was young and couldn't understand.
 - the same as other people.
 - because Michael told them what he learnt at school.
- Why do you think David describes the news that Anne is getting married as 'a new worry'?

Chapter 6

- Answer these questions.
 - Why didn't David and the others want Anne to marry Alan?
 - Why do you think Anne stopped sending thought-shapes to the others?
 - Who do you think killed Alan?
- Write the letter that Anne left before she killed herself.

Chapter 7

- This chapter is called *Messages*. Which people get messages in this chapter and what are the messages?
- Are these sentences right or wrong? Correct the wrong ones.
 - Jerome Skinner didn't believe that Sally and Katherine heard Petra's cries.
 - Uncle Axel knew about Petra because David told him.
 - Petra could only receive messages from people close to her.
 - Uncle Axel killed Alan because Alan knew about David and his friends.
 - All David's friends got away before the inspector arrived.

Chapter 8

Match the names of the people with the endings to make correct sentences.

- David
- Rosalind
- Michael
- Sally and Katherine

- Petra
- killed a man who followed their tracks.
- told the inspector about David, Rosalind and Petra.
- sent the groups of men the wrong way.
- received a message from a woman in Sealand.
- found out that his dream city could be real.

CHAPTERS 9-11

Chapter 9

- Imagine people in the story say these things. Who says them and who do they say them to?
 - 'Go away, we don't want you here!'
 - 'We're coming to help you.'
 - 'I am your uncle.'
 - 'Leave me alone!'
- What do you think is going to happen next? Discuss your ideas with another student.

Chapter 10

- This chapter is called *Brothers at War*. Who are the brothers?
- Answer these questions.
 - How did Sophie help Rosalind and Petra escape from Gordon's tent?
 - Describe the place where Sophie lives.
 - What happened to David's father?
 - What made the strange noise?

Chapter 11

Close your book and read these sentences. Put the sentences in the correct order.

- The flying machine took David, Rosalind and Petra back to Sealand.
- The woman sprayed the threads on David, Rosalind and Petra.
- The men stopped fighting and tried to escape from the threads.
- Shiny threads came out of the flying machine.
- David saw the city from his dreams.
- The woman sprayed the threads on Michael.
- Michael said he would go back to Waknuk to get Rachel.

Activities after reading the book

- What do you think is the most exciting part of the story? Why?
- Imagine that you are making a film of *The Chrysalids*. Make notes about what you will do. Where will you film it? Which actors will you ask to play the parts of David, his father, Rosalind, Petra and Sophie? Which parts of the story will be difficult to film and why? Will you give the story a different ending? If so, what will you change?

